

## **BERLIN, MOSCOW AND BOMBAY: THE MARXISM THAT INDIA INHERITED**

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**M**ARXISM HAS PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN INDIAN POLITICAL THINKING since the time of the foundation of an independent, if truncated, Indian 'nation-state' in 1947. And indeed Marxist ideas became highly influential within the nationalist movement from the 1920s. This was especially related to the role of the communist party or parties, whose electoral strength has been largely confined to one of two regions of the country (although their political and intellectual influence has often been far greater than their numerical size), but to the much wider sway held by Marxist thought amongst other political parties and institutions in post-independence India. Marxist-derived ideas were at the heart of the economic thinking of leading figures in Congress, most notably Jawaharlal Nehru. And the main opponents to these Congress leaders in the period before and after independence, first the Congress Socialists and later the Socialists, were profoundly influenced by a Marxist worldview. This intellectual predominance found expression in institutions such as the Planning Commission and in many universities. In prestigious institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, Marxism has been almost the dominant paradigm.

But Marxism is many different things. Far from being a monolithic body of thought as is often implied by its supporters and detractors alike, it is an evolving tradition of many often competing streams articulated by people in the singular historical circumstances in which they find themselves. To paraphrase Marx himself, people make their own history, but they do so under circumstances inherited from the past. But Marx also observed that inheritances and traditions from 'the dead generations [weigh] like a

nightmare on the brain of the living'.<sup>1</sup> Such an image seems, unfortunately, to be only too apt because India and Indians, in inheriting Marxism as one of the traditions of post-Enlightenment thought, mainly inherited a particular version of Marxism, albeit the dominant version. And that version of Marxism was dominant not because of its intellectual or philosophical force but because of the force of political circumstances. It was dominant because it was articulated and propagated by a powerful state, the Soviet Union, which appeared, at once, to provide an alternative model for economic development and to be the only force capable of resisting first Fascism and then US hegemony.

The central theme of this paper is that this dominant or mainstream Marxism, Soviet Marxism, was a Marxism that had been transformed over the preceding decades of political conflict and debate. In the process, a philosophy motivated by a vision of human liberation through proletarian revolution had been transformed, metamorphosed, into an ideology to justify and legitimise an authoritarian regime. The ideology retained its capacity for inspiration mainly for the leaderships of various nationalist movements in the colonial world as a means of forcing imperial powers to grant independence and as an alternative path to economic advancement and industrialisation free from the influence of the capitalist world. From a view of social change whose historical actors were classes, Soviet Marxism was one where the agents of conflict and change were nations and nation-states. India inherited a translated and reformulated version of Marxism because of events which occurred far from India and with little apparent significance to India. The events were political rather than philosophical, yet they critically determined how one of the key philosophical traditions of the twentieth century came to be represented in India and how they came to represent India.

### **From Berlin to Bombay via Moscow**

The mainstream of the Marxist tradition before 1917, what might be called 'classical Marxism' or perhaps even 'Marxian Marxism', was focused on the possibilities for social change in the industrially advanced capitalist West. Given Marx's own German origins and the fact that the largest party which claimed allegiance to Marxism was the German Social-Democratic Party clearly placed Berlin as the symbolic home for this pre-Bolshevik Marxism.

This was the Marxist tradition that argued that capitalism could only be transcended where the productive forces of society had reached such a level as to place the working class into the position of comprising the vast majority of society. This would thereby create the material circumstances for resolving the great contradiction of capitalist society – that it provided the productive capacity for abundance, but its exploitative social arrangements condemned

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<sup>1</sup> K. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1975), p. 15.

humanity to immense inequality and alienation. The political project of Marxism, then, was to win the class struggle in the advanced capitalist world.

Where did this leave the working class in the less developed regions of the world where the proletariat was not only not in the majority but constituted a tiny minority confined to those parts of the economy in which capitalist production relations prevailed? There was little discussion in Marx's writings about the role that workers could play in the colonial world and in countries just beginning their integration into the capitalist economy.

A crucial example of such a country was, of course, Russia, where capitalist relations of production existed only in certain enclaves of the economy and the political structures of Tsarism hindered the free and further development of capitalism. The Menshevik position was that in such circumstances the working class could only support the political struggle of the liberal bourgeoisie and that working class demands could not be placed on the agenda until such time as the Russian economy had developed to a level comparable with the industrial West. Lenin and the Bolsheviks, on the other hand, developed the argument that the Russian bourgeoisie was too weak to perform what could be its historic tasks and that it was not only possible, but necessary, for the working class to take the initiative and take independent political action to overthrow Tsarism. This would mean transcending or bypassing the stage of capitalist economic development under the rule of bourgeois democracy and moving directly on to the establishment of a state run by and for the working class – a state which would protect an economic system controlled by labour in the cities and by the peasantry in the countryside.

The key caveat, however, which is often written out of accounts of these debates, was that such a pivotal role for the working class in a backward country was seen as only a temporary one. A workers' state, the Bolsheviks argued, could not survive for long if it was isolated in a sea of hostile imperialist powers. The point of a working class seizing power in a backward country like Russia was that the country was the weak link in the chain of European capitalism and to break that link would open up the possibility of sparking revolution in the countries of the advanced capitalist West. Only revolution in these states, first of all in Germany, could ensure the survival of a beleaguered workers' state in backward Russia and help advance the process of economic development and strengthen the social and demographic position of the working class in Russia. In other words, while the locus of Marxism might shift temporarily to Petrograd and Moscow, the leading centres of a transcended capitalist world – an international workers' state – would be in Berlin, Paris, London, New York and so on.

As events developed, of course, the centre of a revolutionary workers' movement did shift to Petrograd and then to Moscow and these cities became the centres which dominated the course of debate on Marxist theory and

strategy. Ultimately, however, the Bolshevik project failed. There were indeed, as hoped in Moscow, revolutionary upheavals in Germany, Hungary and Italy, three empires collapsed and there was a wave of working class unrest from England, to India, to America and Australia. But, nevertheless, the upsurge waned, capitalism survived and the Bolshevik regime was left isolated in backward Russia.

The result of the developments was to distort the development of Marxist thinking for decades afterwards. Because although the regime in Moscow was isolated and was almost toppled in civil war and foreign intervention, it did survive without the revolution spreading. But in the process of surviving, the Soviet regime destroyed the very features which a classical Marxist would have seen as crucial to identifying a workers' state along lines similar to Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune – most notably control of production by the producers and control of the state by organs controlled directly by working people.<sup>2</sup> Instead the Soviet regime was characterised by the harshest discipline and exploitation of labour, the expropriation of the peasants, the destruction of the soviets and trade unions as effective instruments and their replacement by dictatorial state forms.

But all of this was carried out without a bourgeoisie as it was understood in Marx's writings ñ a class of private property owners with legal title as well as control over the means of production. Instead, in Stalinist Russia, the economy and the state were controlled by a bureaucratic party structure, without legal title but with effective control, claiming to act on the behalf of the working class and legitimising its actions in the language of Marxism. At the most basic level, the regime was legitimised by a claim that it represented 'socialism in one country', a claim which to the internationalism of pre-1917 Marxism was a contradiction in terms. In the understanding of classical Marxism, capitalism was a world system and its overthrow could only be accomplished on an international scale.

Despite the reconstituting of fundamental Marxian conceptions implicit in the doctrine of 'socialism in one country', Moscow became established as a permanent rather than a transitory centre dominating debate on Marxist theory and strategy. Soviet Russia appeared to be the only bulwark against fascism and imperialism and the startling economic transformation of the country during a time when the West was mired in Depression was an inspiration to political movements across the world seeking social change.

When Marxist ideas began to filter through the screens of British political control into the Indian subcontinent from the 1920s, the process of the transformation of mainstream Marxism was almost complete. For the young activists attracted to the fledgling Communist Party of India (CPI) in

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<sup>2</sup> K. Marx, *Civil War in France* (Moscow, 1976).

Bombay, Moscow was the unquestioned centre of Marxist thought and the Comintern, increasingly an instrument of Stalin's foreign policy, ensured that any questioning of the view from the Kremlin was expunged from communist parties internationally. The Marxist stream at which the CPI drank was, from the very beginning, the metamorphosed mainstream of Soviet Marxism. The only exception to the intellectual domination of Indian communists by Moscow was M.N Roy who, significantly, came under Marxist influence well before the rise of Stalin. As discussed below, Roy in fact conducted a major debate with Lenin over the political nature of national independence movements in the colonial world.

### **The Inheritance of Soviet Marxism**

As a philosophy of practical politics whose adherents were keen to make an impact on the world around them, the dominance of Soviet Marxism in India had a critical affect on the political direction of the Left in India. The two key elements of the inheritance of Soviet Marxism were the ascendancy of nationalism and what might be called 'developmentalism' or more precisely 'state-centred developmentalism'.

Sanjay Seth, in his important study of the engagement between Marxism and nationalism in India observed that 'the definition of what it meant to be a communist' in India became those who argued for 'a necessary relation between the class struggle and the national struggle'.<sup>3</sup> As he also points out, however, there was no theoretical imperative or logical necessity governing this conclusion. The reality was that most of the activists drawn to Marxism in India were fundamentally nationalists seeking a more militant inspiration to their nationalism than was provided by the Indian National Congress and who wanted to find a link between the economic demands of the workers and peasants and the fight for independence. The Comintern said that the link could be made by declaring, as distinct from theoretically or practically demonstrating, that independence could only be achieved through the workers' fight for socialism. Seth tends to argue as if the acceptance of this particular relationship between Marxism and nationalism can be understood in largely philosophical terms, when the ascendancy of nationalism in Soviet Marxism was the outcome of political expediency rather than the working out of contending philosophical notions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sanjay Seth, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> Seth, for example, notes in passing the fact that the Comintern, in 1928, adopted a fundamental change of position on the relationship between the working class, the communist parties and the national movements in the colonies (a position duly adopted by the Communist Party of India) 'had as much to do with factional struggles in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and with Stalin's consolidation of his power as with any developments in capitalism.' But he then glides over this critically important fact by dismissing it in the following sentence with the phrase: 'Whatever the reason . . .', *op. cit.*, p. 133. Nevertheless,

On the first question – nationalism – there were a number of major debates within the Comintern during its earliest years of existence, from 1919 to 1922, about the nature and political role of nationalism in what were termed the colonies and semi-colonies. The example uppermost in the minds of the participants in the debate was India, particularly during the time of the first non-cooperation movement. Lenin argued that capitalism had passed into a new and final stage – that of imperialism – where a worldwide capitalist system had developed which depended on the ‘superprofits’ to be gained in the colonies. He therefore concluded that the independence movements rising throughout Asia, led by the colonial middle class and bourgeoisie, were movements of oppressed nations attempting to throw off the yoke of oppressor nations in the West.<sup>5</sup> In arguing in this way Lenin made the first important introduction of non-class categories as key factors in Marxist political analysis.

M. N. Roy, on the other hand, argued that to draw a parallel or analogy between the class struggle between labour and capital with that of oppressed versus oppressor nation was false and misleading. He made a case which pointed to the development of indigenous capitalism and hence of an indigenous capitalist class in India which British policies either allowed or, especially in the years after World War I, deliberately facilitated. He concluded that the nationalist movement of the Indian bourgeoisie was essentially a fraternal or internecine struggle between rival national bourgeoisie and not a struggle that could lead to the overthrow of capitalism. He therefore also concluded that the working class in India (and by implication, the working class in other colonies) should not be limited by the political programmes of the nationalist movement but had to place its own class demands on the agenda. The working class should even, if circumstances allowed, actively work towards the overthrow of its ‘own’ bourgeoisie and the establishment of a workers’ state on the Russian model.

The outcome of the debate was that Lenin’s position was largely adopted, but was modified to note that any assessment of the nationalist movement in a particular country should take account of the relationship between the indigenous bourgeoisie and imperialism. This was a potentially crucial modification in that it suggested that nationalist movements were not necessarily progressive and depended for their anti-imperialist content on the nature and origin of the indigenous capitalist class – whether it was entirely dependent on imperial capital for its existence or whether it had a degree of

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despite the rather idealist flavour of Seth’s philosophical emphases in his concluding chapter, one can only endorse his conclusion that ‘an understanding of Marxism’s failure re nationalism – not simply in failing to theorise it adequately, but in succumbing to it – requires, then Marxist studies of *nationalism*. . . they must study nationalism historically, disregarding or at least bracketing the question of which nationalisms are progressive and which reactionary,’ *op. cit.*, p. 234.

<sup>5</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Moscow, 1979).

autonomy giving a material interest in resisting imperialist power. Bourgeois nationalist movements were not necessarily forces that would weaken capitalism as a whole, but were to be assessed on a case by case basis.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted here that Roy's ideas were adopted as a 'Supplementary Thesis on the Colonial Question' at the second Congress of the Comintern, affirming that they were given a comparable status to the line in the official Thesis, even though they had been voted down by the Congress. This was in stark contrast to the way in which the views of colonial delegates were regarded (or disregarded) in subsequent Comintern Congresses in the 1920s when the Comintern had been taken over by the Stalinist dictatorship. Roy himself was expelled from the Comintern in 1926, the same year that Trotsky was exiled.

Back in India, from the mid-1920s onwards the CPI followed every twist and turn of Stalin's Comintern as the needs of the survival of his regime were translated into directives to change and rechange strategy, each change being justified in a *post hoc* theoretical re-formulation. The first line foisted on the CPI (and all other parties throughout the world affiliated to the Comintern) was that of the short but strategically disastrous ultra-Left period from 1928 to 1935 when all bourgeois nationalist movements in the colonies and social-democratic parties in the West were branded as agents of imperialism who were as equally dangerous to the working class as were the forces of fascism. The CPI thus isolated itself from the nationalist movement and from most elements in the labour movement. Then, from 1935, Stalin instituted the line of the Popular Front in which communist parties were directed to ally themselves closely with the liberal bourgeoisie in their own country and to play down independent working class organisation. The change was driven by Stalin's concern about the threat presented to the Soviet Union by the rise of Nazi Germany and his decision to seek rapprochement with the West, a possibility which could be enhanced if the threat of communist-inspired labour unrest was eliminated. In the colonies such as India this meant that the communists should all but dissolve themselves into the nationalist movement, regardless of its class character or anti-imperialist potential.

The political consequences of the embrace of Soviet Marxism became particularly clear during World War II when the CPI first followed the Comintern line during the period of the Nazi-Soviet pact that the war was an inter-imperialist struggle in which all progressive organisations should refuse to participate, and then faithfully took up the contrary position after the invasion of the Soviet Union and called for support of the 'people's war'. The change of line provided the opportunity for the CPI to operate legally and to cooperate with the British war effort, but caused bitter alienation between

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<sup>6</sup> Seth, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-70.

itself and the mainstream of nationalist thought and was to taint the CPI with air of betrayal for years after the war. The Comintern itself was, of course, dissolved during the war as a gesture of conciliation to the Western allies, the ultimate gesture which indicated the extent of its degeneration from a coalition of anti-capitalist parties to a bureaucratic arm of the Soviet state.

But beyond these more extreme examples of obeisance to Moscow, the phenomenon of close political direction from the Kremlin declined in the post-War period following Stalin's death, Krushchev's 'secret speech', and the damage to Soviet standing following the invasion of Hungary in 1956. Yet with the gradual disappearance of overt political influence from Moscow, the stamp of nationalist thinking which emerged during the early days of the Comintern remains indelibly attached to the Left in India. Apparently dissident versions of Soviet Marxism, such as that emanating from Beijing in the 1960s, in fact had more in common with the Moscow version than seemed to be the case to many at the time. And on the critical issue of the role of the nation as an agent for political change, Maoism took the effective jettisoning of class categories to even further extremes.<sup>7</sup> Thus the Left in India has most of its life striven to appear more nationalist than the nationalists. At times the CPI claimed leadership of the nationalist movement, as during the ultra-Left periods from 1928 to 1935 and immediately after World War II, or saw the protection of the Soviet Union as the immediate priority, as after the Nazi invasion of 1941. But whatever the peculiarities of the time, the Left in general has held to the position that India is an oppressed nation and that the natural allies of the working class are the liberal or 'progressive sections' of the 'national bourgeoisie' and that the indigenous capitalist state defended the interests of the entire Indian nation against the depredations of imperialism.

### **'State Developmentalism' and the Problem of Differentiation**

The practical political effect of the nationalist orientation which pervades the Left and the labour movement has been that it has constantly been confronted with the problem of how to differentiate itself effectively from the party identified as the representative of the national bourgeoisie, the Congress Party. Congress was always able to identify itself as the leading party of Indian nationalism and the CPI was left in a 'me-too' role over what it saw as the key issue facing the country. While other Marxist-influenced currents such as the Socialists mounted a major challenge to the predominance of Congress in the pre and post-independence periods, their influence had waned by the 1960s. The split in the CPI in the early 1960s has often been portrayed as reflecting the split between Moscow and Peking, but was

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<sup>7</sup> Brugger and Kelly coined the term 'Eastern orthodox Marxism' to describe the state ideology of Maoist China. B. Brugger & D. Kelly, *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era* (Stanford, 1990), p. 45.

fundamentally over the question of how to analyse the place of Congress in social change in India and how to relate to the party politically.

The problem of differentiation has been particularly acute concerning the other key inheritance of Soviet Marxism – state-centred developmentalism. One of the main points of inspiration provided by Soviet Marxism was that the Soviet Union itself seemed to demonstrate there was an alternative way to bring about the development of the forces of production which did not involve the creation of a bourgeois ruling class or a surrender to international capital. Soviet Marxism was centred not on the project of transcending capitalism through class struggle, but on the project of using the state to mobilise the resources of an independent nation-state, behind autarchic economic barriers, in order to defend the new state's autonomy and to allow it to join the ranks of the economically developed and politically powerful states of the advanced world. The phrase 'building socialism' in the Soviet Union or China was synonymous with building heavy industry and farming with tractors. It was this Marxism that Nehru found attractive. The model of the Soviet Union led to the state-directed planning and strict regulation on the movement of capital and technology in and out of India that has dominated the policies of the Indian state since independence.

Marxism, presented in this way, with developmentalism virtually its central idea, was readily able to be co-opted and was indeed ideologically integrated into the edifice of the Indian state. Being thus co-opted Marxism was largely stripped of its oppositional possibilities and the Left was reduced to being a number of alternative parliamentary parties offering a political program which appeared not fundamentally different from that of Congress. At the height of Left influence in the 1960s and 1970s the CPI became the handmaiden of Indira Gandhi's campaign of empty populism. The CPM took office in West Bengal on a wave of working class unrest, but soon found itself locked into an enclave which limited rather than expanded its options for political activity. After a brief flirtation with using the office to facilitate class struggle by withdrawing police intervention in labour disputes, the CPM came to realise that to occupy even a relatively minor seat in the house of the bourgeois Indian state necessitated crushing more radical challenges to the status quo such as the Naxalites and discouraging independent initiative from labour organisations.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the construction of India (and the rest of the developing world) which was implicit in the version of Marxism that India inherited was such that Marxism was absorbed into the mainstream of Indian political discourse. In the process, most of the potential for Marxism to provide inspiration and direction for organisations of the millions of working people in India being

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of the CPM in West Bengal see S. Sherlock, 'Resolving the Conflict?: The Uncertain Future of Trade Unionism in West Bengal', *South Asian Issues*, Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, Perth, 1993.

drawn into the capitalist economy, both in industry and agriculture, was also absorbed. Rather Marxism became one of the tools of the Indian state in its developmental project.

### **After the Fall: What's Left of Marxism?**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Soviet Marxism have thrown much of the Left in India into a confused and disoriented condition. The political practice of the communist parties in India has, at least since the 1950s, been little different from any social-democratic party in the world, but the example of the Soviet Union provided an inspiration for what communists were, in theory, fighting for. This ideological veneer was also very important for the cadre of the party in maintaining their sense of difference from the Congress and the Socialists, and for sustaining the idea that the communists were the most principled fighters for state direction over the economy, even though planning was part of mainstream thinking in post-independence India.

Economic liberalisation has presented the Left with a challenge in two senses: firstly because the economic restructuring with which it is associated has had major effects, both positive and negative, on the social groups which have been the Left's traditional constituency, and secondly in the sense that liberalisation has resulted from and facilitated the collapse of the post-independence economic nationalist consensus that India's path to development lay through a relative disengagement with the global capitalist economy. Economic nationalism, together with state planning and control of resource allocation, was seen as a progressive idea and the special ideological property of the Left. The institutionalisation of these ideas created a constituency of supporters amongst the state bureaucracy, the managers, administrators and workers of state-owned corporations, the owners of industries shielded against foreign competition and agriculturalists supported by subsidies and tax-free income. Some people amongst these groups were drawn to support Left parties. But unfortunately there does not seem to be any evidence of fundamental rethinking of the issues facing socialist and labour organisations in India today. Instead, on key issues such as ways to respond to the effects of economic liberalisation, there is little more than a repetition of the economic nationalist mantras of the past.

One recent contributor to the *Economic and Political Weekly*, for example, argued that the nationalist movement:

should be revived and led by the working class by boycotting foreign goods ... and preventing if required physically the entry of MNCs, the offspring of the old East India Co, now out to deindustrialise the country.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 April 1997, p. 721.

And although ideas of Third World solidarity have probably the least substance that they have ever had, there is still a school of thought which argues that:

At no time was there a greater need for the concept of the nation state; and the need for the banding together of developing nations greater.<sup>10</sup>

Even considerably more sophisticated analyses, when applied in practical political terms, frequently do little more than return by more complicated routes to old nationalist presumptions. Partha Chatterjee, for example, has attacked ideas of going 'beyond nationalism' when rethinking the position of the Indian state in the world economy, arguing that it would 'strengthen inequalities and defeat the struggle for democracy the world over'.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, sections of the Left with a niche in the state machinery are increasingly adapting themselves to the most conventional of solutions to issues of economic development. The CPM in West Bengal, while rhetorically subscribing to anti-MNC positions in some forums, has been actively developing policies designed to welcome and facilitate the entry of international capital into the state. It is, of course, understandable that a government in its position would take such action, faced with the realities of the domestic and international economy. But it is also these realities which expose the ideological pretensions that the CPM has fundamentally different political priorities from other parliamentary parties. The nationalist starting-point for many Left organisations on questions such as nuclear disarmament has also left them open to accusations of being unable to develop a position which is significantly different from the chauvanism the Hindutva brigade.<sup>12</sup>

A starting point for the reinvigoration of Indian Marxism would be a rediscovery of analyses based on the international class nature of capitalism as distinct from analyses which begin with a conception of oppressed and oppressor nations. This needs to be accompanied by a rediscovery of the politics of the movement rather than the politics of the state. The dominant tradition of the Indian Left has been fixated on attempts to influence the direction of the policies of the state, based on a view that the developmentalist state was in a position to free the mass of Indians from poverty, in contrast to the classical Marxist conception of revolutionary change as possible only by the action of workers themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> Arun Ghosh, 'Capitalism, Nation State and Development in a Globalised World', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5-11 April 1997, p. 686.

<sup>11</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'Beyond the Nation? Or Within?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4-11 Jan. 1997, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> See Praful Bidwai & Achin Vanaik, 'An Open Letter to the Left', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 Jan. 1997, pp. 71-4.

Rather than persisting with increasingly quixotic and irrelevant efforts to lobby the state to somehow, by administrative fiat, prevent the continued integration of India into the world economy, a far more productive route (from the point of view of the empowerment of workers, both urban and rural) would be to attempt to organise those workers and peasants who are actually being drawn into the increasingly internationalised Indian capitalist economy. For example in Bombay, one the principal linkages between the Indian economy and global economy, the key reality confronting workers in their daily lives is not whether their employers are Indians or foreigners, but whether or not they are employed in the formal organised sector or, like increasing numbers of workers, are employed in the appalling conditions of the informal, unorganised sector. But so many Left trade unions have been focused on defending the interests of ever-diminishing numbers of workers in the declining sectors of the textile mills and on the small numbers employed by state-owned services and corporations, and have neglected the difficult work of organising in the ever-expanding informal and service industries which now dominate the Bombay labour market.<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion: translating the translated**

The people of India began developing a mass movement for independence from the British empire at the same time as the ruling institutions of the advanced capitalist world were being shaken by the shocks of world war and an upsurge of unrest amongst working people which in places reached revolutionary proportions. These events brought the influence of Marxism into the forefront of radical and working class politics in India in a new and unprecedented way. The coming together of the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements and its interpretation from a Marxist perspective inevitably flowed through to the Indian political scene. The Indian independence movement, which was previously informed by ideas of liberalism and models such as the Irish independence movement, came under the influence of new philosophical and political traditions that sought to challenge and transcend bourgeois liberalism. But these new ideas had been developed in the context of an urban, industrial capitalist world and foresaw the overthrow of social oppression by a class of people which hardly existed in an economy and society such as India's.

For Marxism to engage with Indian political affairs it had to be translated into a very different political environment from the one in which it was born. In fact, the process of that translation was well under way before Indians were in a position to participate in the debate. And, critically, whereas the debate of early years had been lively and free-flowing (as the

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<sup>13</sup> I have examined some of the issues confronting the labour movement in Bombay in my 'Class Re-formation in Bombay: Has Organised Labour Risen to the Challenge', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Review of Labour, 28 Dec. 1996, L34-L38.

Roy-Lenin debate illustrated), by the time Marxism gained significant currency on the Indian political scene in the second half of the 1920s, the debate had become barren, rigid and dominated by the needs of a particular regime. Translating Marxism into India had become an exercise in translating the translated.

The first stage of the transformation of classical Marxism into Soviet Marxism involved the reformulation of the 'colonial question' into the 'national question' and the emergence of the idea of 'oppressed nation' as an analogous and equally important category to that of oppressed class. This change emerged in the context of efforts to assess the potential of colonial independence movements as weapons against international capitalism. As such, the assessment was contingent and related to the immediate circumstances of harnessing these movements for the fight against capitalism and, where appropriate, developing a strategy for political action for the working class in colonial countries.

This somewhat *ad hoc* adaptation of Marxism by an arguably false analogy between class and nation opened the path to the second stage of the transformation – the equation of Marxism with state-centred developmentalism. In post-revolutionary Russia, the slide from internationalism to 'socialism in one country' was also an *ad hoc* attempt to deal with the isolation of the Bolshevik regime and to legitimise the efforts of the successor Stalinist state (after most of the Bolsheviks were killed or exiled) to build the industrial capacity necessary to survive economically and militarily. The apparent success of this effort meant that Marxism was now nationally-based and supported 'progressive' or 'anti-imperialist' nationalism and proclaimed that socialism was achieved when a state-owned industrial economy was built. This Marxism presented itself as an alternative path to modernity for the backward regions of the world and thus had great attraction for the nationalist intelligentsia and middle class in Asia and beyond. As the influence of both classical and Soviet Marxism waned amongst the working classes of the capitalist world from the 1920s and after World War II, so Soviet Marxism 'succeeded' in places such as China, Vietnam and Cuba. Although Marx was hostile to the nation-state as an instrument of bourgeois rule and the existence of nationalism remained something of an anomaly in Marx's thought,<sup>14</sup> the advocacy of nationalist struggles in the colonial world became virtually the key characteristic of Marxist movements during the twentieth century, at least within Soviet Marxism.

Despite the pretensions to difference, the Soviet Marxist path to modernity was in fact one which was largely defined by capitalism's success: national-state sovereignty and industrialisation. And eventually the differences were to be symbols of failure rather than success. Soviet-style

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<sup>14</sup> Seth, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

economies were often able to establish the elements of a heavy industrial base but were uniformly incapable of making the transition to the mass consumer economy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, the surrender of economic control by the Chinese communists and penury amongst the remnants of the 'Second World', Soviet Marxism stands bereft and discredited.

The crisis for the Left and much of the labour movement in India today lies in the fact that the Marxism that India inherited was the metamorphosed ideology of Soviet Marxism. With the break-down of the virtual consensus in favour of economic nationalism and state-led development which prevailed in post-independence India and the uncritical embrace of neo-liberal ideas amongst much of the intelligentsia and the political leadership, the Left stands isolated and increasingly irrelevant as it cling, half-believing, to the certainties of the past. For the Left to regain a position as an oppositional force, an effective advocate for the people who are bearing the social costs of India's accelerating integration into the world economy, but who are potentially empowered by their transformation into wage-workers, it will need to re-examine many of the presumptions that have been its stock in trade for the last seventy years. Soviet Marxism may have been thoroughly discredited, but many of the other politically obscured traditions of Marxism have not only survived the transition but have been vindicated by the events of the 1990s. If the parties of the Left do not wish to be dissolved into liberalism and right-wing social democracy, a re-investigation of the traditions of classical Marxism could be a rewarding exercise.